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Shareware: Sharing Too Much?

ILLUSTRATION BY BILL RIESER

Ever browsed the Web site of the local symphony orchestra, only to receive a call from the symphony's telemarketers a few hours later? It's no coincidence, says Steve Gibson, founder of **Gibson Research Corp.**, a California-based software publisher. The culprit may be "spyware"—software that lurks on your machine and collects information, then surreptitiously sends it to software makers over the Internet.

Gibson and other privacy advocates contend that many popular programs, including RealNetworks' RealDownload, Netscape's Smart Download, GoZilla, and PKZIP for Windows, are spyware. This type of software has access to a wealth of information on your PC, including the Web sites you visit, your name, your phone number, your e-mail address, and even a unique code that identifies your PC. The information can be used to send targeted banner advertising or even build a personal profile linked to your real name, which can then be sold to advertisers.

Software companies, however, deny any such goings-on. "Any use of RealDownload is completely anonymous, and its communications features are clearly disclosed and optional to the user," says RealNetworks spokesman David Brotherton. "Upon installation, users are informed that download URLs can be anonymously transmitted, and we offer a clear choice to opt out of even that. There are no unique identifiers transmitted with any transactions that would enable us to link download requests to individuals."

Should the average computer user be concerned? "I have found that people are widely and diametrically divided on this issue," Gibson says. "Many people just shrug and say 'Who cares?' Other people are righteously outraged by the idea that any data about them is being collected and aggregated."

One way to avoid privacy piracy is to read those user agreements that most of us blithely scroll through. If it's too late for that, you can check your system for spyware at **Spychecker.com** *(www.spychecker.com)*.

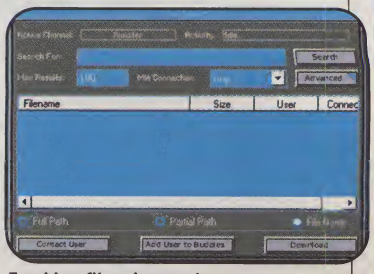
Keep in mind that merely uninstalling the offending software may well leave the spyware features intact and continuing to transmit. More thorough options include using a product such as the free firewall ZoneAlarm *(www.zonealarm.com)*, or Ad-aware *(www.lavasoft.de/aaw)*, free software that scans for and disables spyware. Or, of course, you could always pay for the non-ad-supported version of the software.

—Kevin Savetz

AIMing For Files

Aimster *(www.aimster.com)*, the Napster-like instant-messaging and file-swapping plug-in for AOL Instant Messenger, allows users to chat and trade files on other Internet file-swapping services. More than 2.5 million AOL members already use Aimster, and the new version 3.0 will broaden its appeal by expanding the capability to other messaging platforms, including MSN, Yahoo, Napster, and ICQ.

Aimster spokesman Johnny Deep predicts the new version will draw 2 million new users every month. Many of those newcomers, he believes, will employ Aimster 3.0 to create an ad hoc network. The free product will appeal to small and medium-size businesses that don't have a corporate network but want to enable employees to share messages and files, he says.



Tracking files, instantly

In addition to expanded capabilities, the new version has a customizable, TV-like interface that will simplify use. Aimster plans to offer add-on applications on a subscription basis.

—Elaine X. Grant

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Source: computershopper.com, January 11